

PANAMA

Off the northern coast of Panama, there is pretty diving among the hundreds of small San Blas island, but the Cuna Indian residents chased out the last dive operator (Tom and Joan Moody, now on Namena in Fiji) in 1982. On the Pacific side, low visibility and cool water affects diving.

Bocas Water Sports, Punta Caracol Agua Lodge, July 2005, Harold and Jan Bedoukian, Montreal, QC. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 35 Feet. Water: 85 to 87 F, calm. Bocas del Toro is on Isla Colon. Diving around the island is shallow with generally poor visibility. There are approximately 40 rivers that empty around the island. Visibility on a good day may be 35 to 40 feet and after a rainstorm, the water is murky. Knowing this we still booked a trip. Our accommodations were at Punta Caracol Aqua Lodge, which is totally eco-friendly. Individual cabins are set over the water on a secluded part of the island. It is peaceful and the food was superb. However, if you are into nightlife this is not the place for you. Bocas Water Sports was accommodating and did everything to please us. We spent a restful week with relaxing easy diving; however, after five days we had visited all of the dive sites. The most interesting of the dives was when a large remora joined us. He spent at least 30 minutes trying to attach himself to one of us. Unfortunately there are no large fish and limited numbers of small ones. Lobsters have been fished out.

Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort

and Panama Divers, February 2005, Elizabeth Russell and Linda Natho.

We booked with Jimmy's Caribbean Dive Resort based on internet searches that praised the facility. I later found out that the same person wrote all the reviews, using different names. After driving across the isthmus, we arrived at Jimmy's to find ten-foot seas, surf, and no signs of diving. We had been told on the phone that there was a small chance that the conditions would not be conducive to diving but were not told that there would be no chance for diving. The resort consists of five small cabanas on the not clean beach and an unfinished hotel that is advertised on their website as available for occupancy. Since we were many miles from any other place to eat, we resigned ourselves to eating at the "restaurant." The vegetarian entrée consisted of two tortillas and several slices of cheese. Breakfast was better but not something we could live on for several days. We checked out the next day. They did not hold us to our five-night reservation and only charged us for one night. We tried to find a dive operator along the route back to Panama City, but all the places were not operating. Finally, we could contact Clay with Panama Divers. He picked us up at the Holiday Inn and took us to the marina to pick up the boat. We drove to Portobello and did two dives at Drake's Island. Clay and Jorge, the divemaster, took us out though we were the only two customers. The coral was pristine, lots of fish, and a forest of black coral at 40 feet! Some of the most beautiful reefs we have seen in the Pacific. Between dives, we had a lunch provided by Clay at

one of the 15th century Spanish forts in Portobello. There were emergency oxygen and first aid kit on the boat. The next day, we dove in the Pacific at El Tico and La Chama. These were great sites that offered Pacific diving with currents, surf, surge and a plethora of animals.

PUERTO RICO

The south coast of Puerto Rico has several dive operations, with some walls, good reefs and decent fish life. Puerto Rico is easy to reach from many American cities and sports an interesting Spanish culture, with tour, with small restaurants and hotels along the south coast, as well as national parks inland. Old Town in San Juan is worth a visit. Winters can be cool. The US military has abandoned the island of Vieques, where there is modest diving and still-low real estate prices.

Aquatica U/W Adventures, September 2005, Luis Jimenez (ljimenez295@aol.com), Tampa FL. Experience: 30 dives. Vis: 30 to 40 feet. Water: 87 to 88 F, calm and flat. The owner Jose, and his wife are friendly, experienced and dedicated too. He knows the area, “the Natural” beach, so pretty and calm. We used a DUP and was cool and fun.

La Cueva Submarina Inc., Oceans Unlimited, January 2004, Jolene Eichorn, Little Canada, MN. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 10 to 15 Feet. Water: 79 to 80 F, surge. Went to a site called Crash Boat (there isn't much of a boat to see). I was the only diver so

Charles Aponte from La Cueva took me along with a friend of his. It was a shore dive. I got zero help, although the DMs friend helped the DM out. By the time I got suited up I was tired. Charles took off like we were in a race. The visibility was poor and I struggled to keep up. We went under a dock where people were fishing and my leg got tangled in fishing line. I had to stop and untangle it. After I got the line off and started going again the DM came back to get me and evidently I wasn't going fast enough for him because he grabbed my arm and pulled me along. We saw what was left of a boat, fed the fish some bread, he took my picture and then it was a race back to shore. I was so exhausted I was afraid I wasn't going to make it, meanwhile the DM is already on shore and his friend is helping him take off his equipment. Then I had to try to take off my fins with waves knocking me over — like I said I got zero help. The whole dive lasted 21 minutes, but he tried to tell me we were out there for an hour. Before going on the second dive I told him he needed to slow down. The next dive was to some caverns . I told them I didn't want to be in any tightly enclosed areas, they told me these were big caverns — no problem. I got zero assistance with my equipment and this time we had to carry it all down a long flight of steps to the beach. We went to the caverns and the DM wanted me to follow him through a tight tunnel. I didn't want to go, but it was like a maze in there and I didn't know my way out. I signaled I did not want to go, but he was not going to come back for me, so I had to follow. It was tight and my hands got stung by something. There